

The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,
analysis and investigations on issues affecting
African Americans and the African world.

www.BlackCommentator.com

July 19, 2012 - Issue 481

The Invisibility of Whiteness The Invisible Woman By Sharon Kyle, JD BC Editorial Board

By now, the news that Chris Rock tweeted, "Happy white peoples independence day the slaves weren't free but I'm sure they enjoyed the fireworks" is no longer news. His tweet set Twitter and a good portion of other online media ablaze for a couple of days. Chances are, you read it.

I doubt Rock's reminder that slaves or blacks weren't independent on Independence Day wouldn't have been noticed, much less retweeted in excess of 15,000 times, had it not been for the mention of "white people's independence". I admit that I can't know this with any certainty but my guess is but for those three words, Rock's tweet would have disappeared into the Twitosphere right along with the other million tweets people ignore everyday. But Rock probably knew, when he crafted those 100 characters, that all he had to do was mention white people getting something that black people were denied simply because of race and he'd get a buzz - and mostly from white people.

He was right.

We don't seem to have a problem hearing about black people being enslaved. We're so accustomed to hearing, seeing, and using words like slavery, injustice, inequality, discrimination, disadvantaged, prejudice and the like to describe the state of being black in America that - like background music in a movie - these issues seem to go unnoticed (except, of course, by black people). They're interwoven into the tapestry of American culture. You can talk about these issues

until the cows come home and you'll get little notice, but use those same words while uttering the words "white people" and you've got the making of a viral tweet.

So why is this? How is it that, as a nation, America continues to experience racial disparity in education, healthcare, employment, wages, home ownership, and a host of other areas – and yet, as a nation, Americans don't call for a national response? Could it be that the perception is that these are not America's problems - these are "racial" problems whose solutions are left to those who belong to a particular race? The message being that the vast majority of Americans, more specifically white Americans, don't see themselves as part of the problem or part of the solution when it comes to issues around race.

In speaking of the racelessness of whites, sociologist and author, Allan G. Johnson, wrote in his ground breaking book, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, "Beth - a white student - could be alert to the realities of economic discrimination against Black communities while still conceptualizing her own life as racially neutral - nonracialized."

We often hear of minorities and women getting the short end of the stick or less than their fair share or being disadvantaged. Rarely if ever is attention brought to the other side of the coin - those who are getting more than their fair share, the over-advantaged, the ones who get the long end of the stick. We know it's impossible for someone (through no fault of their own) to get the short end of the stick without somebody else receiving the long end - the unearned privilege (frequently not asked for but used nonetheless). Which goes to the explosion caused by Chris Rock's tweet and more specifically, the harsh treatment he got for posting it. It's one thing to talk about the plight of blacks but quite another to bring whites into the picture. That gets dangerously close to looking at the other side of the coin.

As a writer for an online social justice magazine, I am frequently asked to write about issues of race. Recently, I was introduced to a woman who is alleging that she is experiencing discrimination on the basis of race, at her place of employment - California State University. The woman is a long-term employee and tenured full professor at California State Northridge. She is also black.

She's asked me to do an investigative piece because she feels she is being set up to lose her position. After listening to her story, and knowing what I know about employment discrimination, I told her not

to expect much. I sensed that she hoped her story could make a difference but I thought it was important for her to have realistic expectations. Then I started researching for the piece which will be published in a few days. *[Look for the article on the BC Twitter and facebook pages.]*

In my search for information, I learned that the racial imbalance at the faculty level of the California State University was so out of kilter with the state's population that in September of 2001, the California State Legislature adopted a piece of legislation, ACR 73, that "urged" the university to conduct a study of its hiring practices in order to effectuate improvements and to develop and implement a plan of correction.

I also discovered that as of 2010, 70% of the faculty is white while 35% of the student body is white. Today, blacks represent only 4% of the faculty and multiple examples of racial and gender discrimination lawsuits against the university can be found with a single Google search.

For example:

In 2002, Pat Washington, a black woman and former assistant professor in the women's studies department at San Diego State University (SDSU), filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, alleging that she had been discriminated against on the basis of sex and race. The EEOC found in her favor and recommended that the university award her tenure, promotion to associate professor, and back pay with benefits. Despite the EEOC's recommendation, Pat Washington had to sue Cal State to get the recommended remedy. The case went back and forth through the appeals process with Dr. Washington taking it all the way to the California Supreme Court. In April of 2005 the court chose not to hear her case.

In 2003, a sharply divided federal appeals court refused to reinstate a jury's \$637,000 damage award to a former California State University at Hayward professor who claimed he had been denied tenure because of his race and African origin. The professor, Dr. Mohamed Osman Elsayed, is from Sudan. He was the first black tenure-track professor at the school's mass communications department.

Cici Mattiuzzi, the Director of Career Services in the College of Engineering and Computer Science at CSU, Sacramento, has filed a suit against CSU because she alleges retaliation in the form of exclusion from meetings, being denied office space and other unfair actions after she settled an earlier case against the university for various theories, including gender discrimination. Mattiuzzi's case is current.

In a current case being heard at the California Superior Court, an associate professor, Lauri Ramey, alleges she was discriminated against when she was hired as a tenured associate professor at CSULA, because she was paid less than a male professor hired at the same time. She complained about this perceived wage discrepancy, and now claims that she is the victim of discrimination and retaliation. The EEOC found in her favor, but did not pursue the case. The case is in the discovery phase.

Michael Pounds of Cal State Long Beach alleges discrimination based on his age, race, and disability. Pounds, a 61-year-old African-American man with a visible disability alleges several acts of discrimination including his appointment as department chair for one year as opposed to the typical three-year term. His case against California State University was recently dismissed.

Mohammad Noori was Dean of the College of Engineering at Cal Poly until June 2010. Professor Noori has filed a suit claiming he was removed as dean because of his race/national origin and religion, and was retaliated against because he complained about discrimination. This case is current.

But in the face of this anecdotal information, as well as years of statistical data that point to racial and other non-merit based inequities at California State University, the focus continues to be on one side of the inequality coin - the underserved, the disadvantaged, the short end of the stick and so it remains "their" problem to solve.

To better illustrate this point, I contacted Allan G. Johnson and asked his permission to reprint an excerpt from his book, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*. He granted it.

This is what came to mind for me as I watched Chris Rock's tweet trending while researching racial inequities at Cal State University-- thank you Professor Allan G. Johnson:

In 1990, ABC News aired as a segment of Prime Time a documentary called True Colors. It focused on two men who were quite similar in every observable characteristic except race: one was black and one was white. The crew used hidden cameras and microphones to record what happened in various situations - applying for a job, accidentally locking oneself out of the car, trying to rent an apartment, shopping for shoes, buying a car and so on. Over and over again the two men were treated differently. In one instant, for example, the white man wandered into a shoe store in a shopping mall. He was barely across the threshold when the white clerk approached him with a smile and an outstretched hand. He looked at some shoes and then went on his way. Minutes later his black partner entered the store and from the outset was utterly ignored by the clerk, who stood only a few feet away. Nothing the black man did seemed to make a difference. He picked up and looked at shoes, he walked up and down the display aisles, he gazed thoughtfully at a particular style. After what seemed an eternity, he left.

When I show True Color in my race class and at diversity training sessions, I ask whites if they identify with anyone in the video. Invariably they say no, because they don't see themselves in the black man's predicament or in the racist behavior of the whites. Somehow, the white partner who is on the receiving end of the preferential treatment is invisible to them, and if I don't mention him, he rarely comes up. In other words, they don't say, "Yes, I see myself in the white guy receiving the benefits of white privilege."

The effect of this obliviousness is for them to become invisible as white people in everyday situations and unaware of how privilege happens to them, especially in relation to other whites. They don't see themselves as being involved in situations in which privilege comes into play. They don't see, for example, that simply being white puts them in a particular relationship with someone like the shoe store clerk (whom they readily identify as racist) or that this relationship affects the way customers of color are treated and the way they are treated as whites.

The invisibility of whiteness illustrates how privilege can blind those who receive it.

It is easy to confuse intentions with consequences. Systems of privilege continue to wreck havoc in the lives of many while conversely providing unearned advantage to others, irrespective of intent. There is no such thing as doing nothing. There is no such thing as being

neutral or uninvolved. At every moment, social life involves all of us - those with the short end of the stick and those with the long end. We need to address the systems that cause and maintain both.

BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board member and Columnist, Sharon Kyle, JD, is the Co-Founder and Publisher of the [LA Progressive](#) an online social justice magazine. With her husband Dick, she publishes several other print and online newsletters on political and social justice issues. In addition to her work with the LA Progressive, Ms. Kyle holds a Juris Doctorate, is an adjunct professor at Peoples College of Law in Los Angeles, and sits on the board of the ACLU Pasadena/Foothills Chapter and the Progressive Caucus of the California Democratic Party. Click [here](#) to contact the LA Progressive and Ms. Kyle.



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